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An influential gun-rights group known for backing Republicans is unlikely to endorse President Bush until after the federal assault-weapons ban expires in September.

Bush supports the renewal of the 10-year ban but has not called on the GOP-controlled Congress to act. If he does so, the move would probably cost him the endorsement of the National Rifle Association (NRA).

Some political observers believe that the NRA's endorsement is a certainty, pointing out the group's stinging criticism of Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.), the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee.

But gun-rights activists dispute the claim that Bush can count on the NRA's support; the group remained neutral in 1992 and 1996. The NRA did not endorse Republican nominee Bob Dole's 1996 presidential bid because of his wavering stance on the assault-weapons ban and opted not to back George H.W. Bush in his 1992 re-election effort. The NRA did endorse George W. Bush in 2000.

Many Capitol Hill aides and lawmakers say Bush will determine whether the ban is extended beyond Sept. 13. An aide to House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.) has said privately that if Bush pushes for it, the ban will probably be reauthorized. But if he doesn't, the chances of legislation's passing this year are remote.

Chris Cox, the NRA's chief lobbyist, said the group usually does not endorse presidential candidates until the fall and will not be changing its schedule this year.

He acknowledged that this year is a bit different from previous election years: "Clearly, there are some issues that are still on the table [in 2004]."

Cox declined to say when the NRA will make an endorsement decision, saying, "I'm not going to broadcast our strategy six months before the election."

He said the policy on the assault-weapons ban will be resolved by Congress, adding that it is no coincidence that soon after the 1994 ban was enacted, Republicans took control of Capitol Hill.

NRA officials said the statements and voting records on what the NRA calls the "Clinton gun ban" are key factors in its endorsements for all political candidates.

Centrist Republicans in the House are urging the administration to get involved. In an interview, Rep. Michael Castle (R-Del.) said, "Pressure will build" to renew the ban in the coming months.

Castle said he is working with Reps. Christopher Shays (R-Conn.), Mark Kirk (R-Ill.), Mike Ferguson (R-N.J.) and Carolyn McCarthy (D-N.Y.) to pass a bill that parallels the gun bill passed in 1994.

"The legislation would pass if it came to the floor," Castle said. "There are a number of Republicans who would support this."

Gun-rights activists dispute Castle's vote count, but, at least for now, the question is whether the bill will make it to the House floor.

House Majority Tom DeLay (R-Texas) is against extending the ban, which was passed when Democrats were in control of Congress and the White House.

Hastert, meanwhile, has given mixed signals on the issue, and police chiefs from his state are lobbying him to call for a vote.

A majority of the Senate in March voted to extend the ban.

"The House is the issue," Castle said. "The problem is in the House."

If Bush and Hastert do not act, it is likely that a discharge petition would be launched to force a vote on the floor.

Castle, however, said, "It is too early to discuss discharge petitions," adding that House GOP leaders frown upon them.

So far this year, Bush has given no indication that he will speak out on the gun ban. Instead, the administration appears to be courting the NRA's endorsement.

Late last year, NRA officials visited with Bush at the White House. Last month, Vice President Dick Cheney spoke out, at an NRA conference, about protecting the right to bear arms.

Castle downplayed the significance of an NRA endorsement, saying a vast majority of NRA members are not going to vote for Kerry, whether Bush gets the group's backing or not.

But others said such an endorsement is key to Bush's re-election hopes because it would mobilize an integral cog in the conservative movement.

Larry Pratt, executive director of Gun Owners of America, said many Reagan Democrats voted for Bush in 2000 partly because of the NRA's endorsement. He added that Bush's triumphs in states such as Tennessee, Virginia and Arkansas were attributable to the NRA's grassroots effort and Al Gore's strong gun-control views.

Asked when the NRA would likely endorse Bush, Pratt said, referring to the day after the ban would expire, "I think Sept. 14 would make a good date."